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Interview; Conrad Toepfer Jr.; 04-10-1994

William Kayatin, Jr.

Conrad Toepfer, Jr.

Mr. Toepfer was a member of Local 533 (Black) of the American Federation of Musicians, Buffalo, New York. He invited me to his work place, University at Buffalo, Amherst, New York, on April 10, 1994 for an interview.

Q: Okay, sir. Your full name?

T: Conrad F. Toepfer, Jr.

Q: By the way, I, I read that article in, in the Middle School Journal, I think it was.

T: You know, that gives you most of the background you need on me really.

Q: That was nice. Well, reiterate it for me anyway.

T: Oh, I don't like to talk about myself much.

Q: Born in a, born where?

T: I'm from Scheinfurt, Germany.

Q: I was born in Frankfurt.

T: Really, well that's very close. [Tape Indescribable]

Q: So you were born in Germany.

T: Yeah.

Q: Which was West Germany at the time.

T: No, it was Germany. There was only one Germany at that time.

Q: Is that right? And birth date?

T: 1927.

Q: You were born the same year as, as, uh, Mr. Legge.

T: Yep. Jim and I are the same age.

Q: You don't, uh. He looks great, by the way.

T: Oh, he does?

Q: He really does. I don't know how long it's been since you've seen him.

T: About five, six years.

Q: But, he looks great. He's doing real well. When did you move to the states?

T: 1933.

Q: And was it here in Buffalo?

T: Yep, father became concert master of Buffalo Symphony, the forerunner of the Philharmonic.

Q: I'll be darn.

T: My background was like the other last eight generations of my family: violin; viola; got interested in jazz; wanted to play; string bass was the easiest thing to get to; and the rest of it you can pick up in that article.

Q: When did you join, uh, the uh. You were a member of Local 533.

T: Yeah.

Q: That's correct.

T: Yeah.

Q: When did you join?

T: Oh, about . . . See I had an 803 card out of New York City for a long time and then I transferred here in about 1953 to 533. I kept my card, but let it lapse when I moved to Georgia in 1979. When I returned to this area in 1981, I didn't pick my card up.

Q: Well, that's a, you got quite a...Now, your music was a hobby. It wasn't an occupation? You were [Tape Indescribable].

T: Well, it was a fascination for awhile.

Q: It was!

T: I played for a little while bit subbing with the Philharmonic and then on the road I played briefly with Stan Kenton and George Schearing for awhile.

Q: Stan Kenton. This is all. Is Stan Kenton and the other fellow...

T: George Schearing.

Q: Is that, uh, ja, jazz?

T: Uh huh. I got tied into folk music because it was a way of making money at that time. I backed such people as Judy Collins, and Josh White, Bonnie Dobson. Folks like that became a house bassist at the Limelight Gallery in the '60s. Then did some more jazz trio work 'til about 1969--'70. Then I only was playing for the fun of it once in a while with colleagues here. We had our group here at the State University of Buffalo.

Q: Uh huh.

T: And I hung around all those years with my friends down at the, uh, Musicians' Club. I was close friends with the man that was a secretary for many years, Lloyd Plummer.

Q: I'm suppose to go visit him tomorrow.

T: Really? He's still alive? I have not gotten a Christmas card from him in about a decade and just figured that Lloyd was dead.

Q: Oh, shoot [Tape Indescribable].

T: Lloyd, Lloyd was a good friend of my dad and would you give best. I'll have to get in touch with him.

Q: I will do that.

T: I simply thought he wasn't around. When I went to Georgia I lost contact with him. Came back here in 1983, so that's 11 years. A real fine gentlemen.

Q: That's what I, everybody has been telling me. He's at the Episcopal Church Home down on Rhode Island.

T: He is. Okay. I ought to stop down and see him.

Q: And I talked to his social worker who, you know, watches over his care, and she said he's hard of hearing, uh, reads the paper, has visitors, um, she said she doesn't know how much he'll be able to remember or hear from our conversation, but she felt good about me coming down and giving it a shot.

T: Yeah, I remember he was nice enough to come to my dad's funeral in 1972. I remember that, and I did see him down at the Local after that. He was a good man.

Q: He was there from day one.

T: Just about. He use to run an insurance business. And he had his offices downstairs. The Club's upstairs, and he was secretary of the, the local. He was just a real good man.

Q: That's what I hear. That's what I hear. Um, now when did you get into teaching?. When did you pick that up along the way.

T: Oh, I started teaching in 1950s. I was a junior high school teacher. And then an administrator, and then a doctorate in curriculum. And I got into the university world about 1964 and been mostly here. I was at the University of Georgia for awhile.

Q: Wow. That's very interesting. From your experiences with, uh, 533 and the Club, describe the relationship you had with 533, especially considering that you are the first, maybe the only white musician I'll talk to, that, uh, was associated.

T: No, there are others. There all dead now. Audrey LaDow was white. And there was a labor relations person named Victor Einnach. Victor's been dead for some years. And there were several people, Norman Vogt, V-O-G-T, who's retired now, a piano man, used to play down there. We just didn't like the idea of being told that people had to be separated. And we thought, well. I remember when I went down to join, saw Mr. Plummer, and he asked why I'm joining here. He knew my father had been very active in as concert master and symphony. He asked why I didn't want to join the white local. I said, "Most of my friends are here," and he just started smiling. That's why I came down here. And I had gotten to know James "Graf" Young. He was a graduate student of mine here and was also an English teacher in Buffalo. I started going down and started playing with the band down there, and sitting in there Monday nights, and going down and just hanging around there, and got to know Jim Legge. Jim's father was a great show musician named Tony Wade, who wrote the music theme for Route 66 and had it stolen from him. The other guy made the money on it. Tony use to play in area clubs. He's been dead, probably, 15, 20 years. Jim had a younger brother named Wade Legge, who was a really great coming national jazz player. He died about 1968--complications of stomach ulcer.

Q: Was it the...Did it have a lot to do with the music? I mean, obviously, 533 catered more to jazz.

T: Well, the kind of jazz that was played and the kind of people that played it were important. Oscar Peterson says that if you understand jazz you can never be a racist. By that definition, there are lots of people in the white local who were good players, but really didn't understand jazz because they were racists. And that was the whole seed of it. Last Saturday night, my son came up from Pittsburgh. We went downtown to hear the Wailers' tribute to Bob Marley. The spirituality of Bob Marley's music dealt with the same issues that caused me to say that if people can't come here, I'm gonna go be with people. No one ever understood the importance of the fact that I was accepted there as a white person, something that my white colleagues couldn't do for blacks. People knew The Colored Musicians Club around the country. I remember one night, Jim Young and I were going down to the Royal Arms, which was a club on Utica, between Linwood and Main Street. He had to pick up travelling dues from Thiloneus Monk, who could be a very ornery guy. The night before the white local had gone down and tried to collect them. However, he had no truck with them. So, we came in, caught the first act and Jim went back and said, "Mr. Monk I'm from 533. I'm here to collect your travelling dues." "Mr. Monk," he said, "No one recalled me Mr. Monk." He said, "I must owe you", and he wrote a check and that was it. There was a lot of resentment because people down at The Colored Musicians Club could play, they could wail. A lot of people didn't like the idea that I was there. "Why don't you come back to the white local," they would ask. I said, "Because I don't believe in separation." Uh, when the move to integrate separate unions developed and the National said, "We gotta break this. In the '60s, there were horror stories all around the country because in many places, including Chicago, the treasuries of white and black locals were combined. It went into the white treasury. And the members of the colored or black group were "allowed" to then join the white local. Perry Gray was the president here. Perry's been dead along time now. He, Mr. Plummer, and Jim Legge and guys like Iggy Ridding and Eddy Inge were on the Board of Directors here along with a drummer named Harold "Sticks" Wallace. He use to play with Iggy Riding at what is now Fanny's on Sheridan Drive. Then it was called the Club Sheridan. They had a group called the Sheridanaires. Wallace was also deputy sheriff under Edward Rath, who was the Erie County Clerk. Wallace had a lot of political connections and he made sure and talked to people on both sides to make sure that the black local would not lose their

resources in the merger. No money was lost, no property was transferred, nothing happened. While there was then only one local here, you still found that people who like music were going down to Broadway and Michigan Avenue to The Club. There was so much talent at The Club. I mean guys like Bob and Bill Crump. Bill Crump had worked, with the Count Basie Band. C. Q. Price played with the Count Basie Band, came back, and started the wonderful big band they had down there. And a lot of the older guys like Eddy Inge use to play with McKinney's Cotton Pickers and people who had played with The Jimmy Lunsford Band. Jimmy Lunsford was a Buffalo guy. Others had played with the Fletcher Henderson Band. When they retired from being active musicians, many of them been in the postal service at one time. And, they could still come back to Buffalo and get a postal clerk job back here. So they were able to support themselves like that and still gig around and hang around The Club. I remember the last time I saw Duke Ellington. He was playing at a place on Bailey Avenue called Eduardo's. All the guys from The Club were there and, of course, Duke was glad to see them as well. Paul Gonsalves and Harry Carney, and the others in the band, I mean, the people from The Club here were known by people all over the country. Travelling groups would come to town here, they would hang out down there. When Nat King Cole was finished playing at the Town Casino, he'd come down there. Sometimes, from there, they would go down to Ann Montegomery's Little Harlem on Michigan Avenue. You'd find that when people like Lionel Hampton, Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie finished playing in Toronto, because Toronto on Saturday nights closed around 11:30 - 12 in those days, they'd come up to Buffalo just to hang out down at The Club. You never knew who you were going to hear down there because, uh, no, it was, uh, it was the place. But, the guys from the former white local couldn't understand why they didn't go to other places to hang out. That is because there was nothing like that wonderful room upstairs at the Club. Someone was always playing, you would get a drink, or whatever, and just sit down and, and be with people. It was a place where you didn't have to worry about the issues of the outside world. You could just talk music and things like that; and that's what it made so special.

Q: I've talked to a lot of people on both sides and as far as the relationship between 43 and 533, they said it was pretty congenial.

T: It was when it came to the real world. Uh, oddly enough, the thing that was so fascinating about the African Americans, they didn't hold grudges like the white

musicians. Why? Because they weren't threatened. They were better musicians. Everybody knew it, but, uh, they didn't get the gigs. The other people did. You could go down and listen to that bands play usually on, uh, Monday nights, uh, C. Q. Price's Band would be up there. Yet some people tried to pirate their stuff out on tapes for black market use. C. Q. Price was wonderful...All the great arrangements, Bill Crump brought some of them from The Basie Band They had a lot of Neil Hefti arrangements and things like that. It was just a great group. You know, it was congenial because they weren't robbed of their treasury, they weren't robbed of their property. Legally you had to legally go through Local 43 for gigs which meant their white inner circle made the control for the jobs and the gigs. African American musicians would get cut out of possibilities because you had to go through the one union and union would say, "Well, this is a better group or this guy won't play certain kinds of music."

Q: So there were cliques.

T: Oh definitely. There were cliques. Uh, I guess the big thing is that the people in 533 and Colored Music Club had soul. Oh there were some very angry people. I mean, some tended to be quite angry, but I remember when Kenny Green's brother, Harold, this was about 1960, was selected by the State Department tour the Middle East and play jazz. And he was a really celebrity for that. But he came back and couldn't get many gigs. He use to say, "Yeah, but what good is it for if you can't starve for it." Uh...

Q: Why couldn't he get a job?

T: Well, just wasn't being hired. You know, there was nothing for a group as good as that. Tour on the road, they weren't big enough to go out as a group. They weren't known that well in this country, but he'd come here and hang around and gig around a little bit, played music. But, the point was the music meant more than selling out. And they didn't sell out. Of course, if you had to go through the other side, the other side wasn't so good about it. As a result, a lot of the African American musicians would work non-union gigs because the union wouldn't come through for them. The Black man that owned the Blue Moon Club on Masten and Perry Street, has owned a couple of clubs since then. He got to the point that he would hire non-union musicians at a higher wage than union guys just so he could get these guys to work. So it wasn't the fact that they were being cut out, but the fact is, uh, the black clubs were

disappearing. Those that remained would hire musicians from The Club just so they wouldn't have to go through and work through the local here.

Q: Hmm.

T: Of course, I didn't have that problem after a while because, again, the fact that I was white. I could work. But the groups that I worked with, I worked basically Norm Vogt's Trio and Bob Brandel's Trio used good players, regardless of color. If you had a chance to work with a guy like Graff Young or a guy like Diz Williams, or Willy Dorsey, or that, you get a little group together of people and go and play, but you wouldn't go through the union because you get all kinds of hassle.

Q: Hmm.

T: So the circle was very, very nice, but, uh, when it came to the business end of the operation, the, the black musicians got the short end of things. That's why Bob Rossberg from SUNY Buffalo plugged musicians for The Club on his jazz radio show on WBFO. Uh, was able to get C. Q. Price's Band some gigs out here, and because the University wanted to do it. The local had to go along with it, but again they always said, "You don't have to use this guys group or that guys group." Here you had a 17 piece band here that played wonderful music. It was the best in the area so no one could talk you out of hearing them. Because the University had the money, and they paid full scale, there was no problem. So that was always a sore note also on the other side, too. But a guy like Al Tinney, who plays today, might be able to tell you. He's a major performing jazz player and should be able to tell you about what the upscale things today.

Q: Hmm. Would you like to talk a little bit about the merger? People all have done it.

T: Yep. The merger was suppose to be for the black musicians I don't think either side really wanted it. In a sense the white local here was hoping they could pull things off as it had been done in other areas, but the leadership at 533 was too smart for that to happen.

Q: Meaning?

T: They kept their money. They kept their property, etc., etc. There was no buy back in terms of or a new dues scale to come into the reorganized union. None of that happened. But the thing that held it together here was

that the Club was there. You see, if there hadn't been the Club, and they'd operate simply out of an office, and that office folded, they'd have no place to go. But that place on Broadway, then became the mecca for musicians coming to this town for, oh, probably 20-25 years before that. All through the '40s the, the Bop Era, and onward to more recent times. So it continued to be that. So once the merger was done, the merger was done. But, again, there was still the Colored Musicians' Club, which was where people went to be, to hear, to listen, to socialize, etc., etc. And then you found more and more of the younger musicians, uh, uh, coming across, in a sense, coming down and being welcome there and you got a larger number of people who really didn't share a deep prejudice about this. In that sense, the merger probably helped. There were more people who began to respect things from a new point of view. But there were people who wouldn't have come over when they had the separate situation. Now, the fact that we were all one, some personal relationships developed around that. But there were still some bitterness on the parts of the older people. Hank Roberts was never happy about it. The Hackney Brothers were never happy about it. Uh, uh, Ballard Johnson, an organist who use to do gigs around town with didn't get the kinds of things he use to get because they just didn't go for an organist who didn't charge as much because he had to truck his old organ around. So there were some hard feelings on it. The other thing was the advent of more interest in rock and other music.

Q: The economy factors in.

T: Yeh, the economy factor into it, but you just didn't have that many people becoming jazz players anymore. So it was sort of like the roots of the tree were cut off. It later became a club really where, uh, a lot of the rock musicians, even the traveling black rock musicians, would hang out with the rap singers, and things like that. So, what it still remains a kind of mecca for people who want to come down and just get into a little bit of a time warp with the music.

Q: So it preserved 533s identity.

T: Yep, there was Art Anderson to whom you've talked, a fine pianist died about four or five years ago The house pianist at the Anchor Bar, Johnny Gibson was never affected negatively. He lived on Monroe Street and hung out at the Club. He played at the Anchor Bar because Frank and Theresa, the owners, liked him. They always liked him, and even after the merger they weren't go look

for someone else. And played there until within a few months of his dying. But, uh, he was a, a fine jazz pianist. We use to play in group with Sam Falzone. Those groups crossed the racial separation. But others would not. They would say, "Well, I'm not going to play with that cat because he's white." Some didn't like the idea of white cats coming and hanging around the Club. But, the spirit of the place prevailed because the angry folks were definitely the minority. Even though there were some people up there that get a little bit testy you didn't worry about that. Some fine groups continued playing down there. You had, you had groups like Eddy Inge's Woodwind Octet. They would play actual classical music. You'd go down and hear a concert down there, and you'd hear a lot of jazz and stuff, but you'd hear classical music and all sorts of things played. One night it would be jazz, one night this, a couple nights they would have somebody who was classical, or something like that, or all sorts of things. So it wasn't the fact that you heard people who were only jazz players. They were all schooled musicians. They could all read, and, of course, they had ears, like most of the people on the white local wished they had. And as far as improvisation, and that kind of stuff it was just wild.

Q: Hmm. That's interesting. This is kind of a general question, but it's one I've always asked. Ninety two, you have now...How did it affect, well you talked about how it affected black musicians. You touched on that, and maybe you've already answered this question as well. Did it make things better?

T: Probably not. It gave a unified base, but it's not really unified in the sense that if you go to Niagara Falls, you've got a Niagara Falls local, you've got a Cheektowaga local out here.

Q: So, if you're going to do it, do the whole thing.

T: Yeah, yeah.

Q: That's what the Federation didn't do...

T: That's what it did.

Q: ...because they're losing, they'd lose money.

T: That's right. Then again, it's like in 1945, we didn't unify 45 little police forces. In a metro police force, a bunch of chiefs are going to lose their jobs, and things like that. Oh, it was interesting. We had a retirement party for a university professor a couple of

weeks ago and a guy was looking for a piano player. And all the people I would recommend, he couldn't use. I told him to call the locals. So he figured since this isn't in Buffalo, he'd call the local in Cheektowaga. They said, "Oh know, you've got to go through Buffalo Local." And this person said, "Why? This is in, this is in Williamsville, Amherst." "Well, you gotta go through them." So that's how they still grab that kind of stuff. Unless you're in Depew or Cheektowaga or some place out there, you can't get to those people. These guys still got their little kingdoms of empire out there, their phone answering machines, their things like that. A lot of groups used to come through there to play at places like the Town Casino and the Glen Casino and the McVans night clubs. They had four, five, six, eight, ten, twelve piece bands playing there, but not anymore. Now have the sound system. You now have the rhythm masters and things like that.

Q: What's a rhythm master?

T: Well, a piano player puts his bass and rhythm behind it on a synchronized tape, and he's just a player. It's basically a synthesizer. But you cut out two or more live musicians.

Q: I see.

T: And so you'll hire a guy with a synthesizer where you use to have a trio play. Same thing. So that's replaced live musicians. And, how often do you hear 17 bands, piece bands anymore? These groups that come out and play, like the old Dorsey band [Tape Indescribable] play at the Hearthstone Manor or places like that. But they're picking up mostly local guys for that and three or four guys that travel with them. But again, the cost is prohibitive. One of the last time I heard Woody Herman play was the Royal Arms. We were watching Woody and the fact is that you can't finance the cost now to take that Band on the road today.

Q: Hmm.

T: So I'm not sure what the future is for the musicians local because you can see what the future is for unions in general in this country. Unions are no longer a power base.

Q: It's legislation.

T: Yep.

Q: That has prevented unions from having power.

T: Yep. Sure.

Q: The Taft Hartley Law.

T: Sure. 1947 that was the first one that took it right there.

Q: Landrum Griffith.

T: Yep.

Q: Labor Management Act.

T: Yep.

Q: Some of that stuff.

T: All that stuff if just the face of these things. And, of course, now with the mechanization and synthesizers and that sort of stuff, uh, you listen to some of these things I mentioned. I just listened to the last Barbra Streistand concert. There were five guys there with synthesizers. I mean used to see Barbra Streistand with a big band like Nelson Riddle's Orchestra. They wanted the big bands. Now it is all, you know, facsimile sound at a fraction of the cost of a band. Just listen to what you can do with some of these things like the rolling keyboard. You can have it set up now that you think you're listening to a concert grand. You use good speakers and that stuff and that's what does it.

Q: Hmm.

T: Then you can add a sax sound to it, and you can add this to it, and the rhythm, and the bass sound, and, you're still hiring only one guy.

Q: The Federation won't do it because they'd lose money...

T: Sure.

Q: As well.

T: Sure.

Q: Their making money off all these folks. One of the last things that, that I had my talk about and I think you're a testimony to it, um, Cornell West, Dr. Cornell West, who's here, raised matters, he wrote that and, and something he talks about, said although the black

organizations were separate, they weren't separatists. [Tape Indescribable].

T: Uh huh.

Q: Applies to 533...

T: Yep.

Q: Colored Musicians' Club?

T: They weren't excluding anybody. They came together because they could with other people. Talent was there, the ability to make money was there. I mean, most people will look at a guy like Nat King Cole as being black. Well he was, and he was accepted as an individual, but denied as a class. I mean you see, that's the kind of talent you had, and, uh, when people were buying his records as a singer after he gave up being a jazz pianist, and he was a great pianist. He was just as good as Oscar Peterson or Art Tatum. Oscar Peterson gives Nat Cole a lot of credit. He took a lot of style from Nat King Cole. But Cole had been able to make it as a, a singer, an entertainer, and movies. When talent was so overpowering, people like him could succeed. The Louie Armstrong's made it, the Lena Horne's made it; they were the best. So begrudgingly, there had to be a place for them to work. Because you couldn't go to rest rooms with people, you couldn't eat with people, and you couldn't belong to unions with people. So you formed your own place, and they were second, you know, they were second class places over there because of default, but talent was still there.

Q: Uh huh.

T: And so they were separate, but they were never separatists. Then '60s saw the co-advent of the black separatist movement and the Church of Islam. Some guys with the union joined The Church Of Islam, which I think was a great thing because the Church of Islam got a lot of people to go "cold turkey" off drugs and start taking care of their women and families and things like that. However, it was a separatist movement. The Muslims have never come back into the main stream America. But the local wasn't that way. They were there because they needed a place to get to be able to play and work, etc. and because you couldn't belong to the white local, since you had to belong to some local, they had separate locals like we had separate schools and separate everything else at one time in this country. But the talent was there. They were the goldmind.

Q: They were it.

T: Some of those folks on the white side couldn't walk and chew gum at once, let alone improvise a couple of choruses of "How High the Moon." So, it, uh, it was an interesting thing. It was always kinda fun to be with those folks 'cause you wanted to be, and they really could sense and appreciate people who were there not to be seen, but they were there because they respected the talent there. They liked them as people, and, in their own minds and hearts, they realized that there was a difference. It was a, it was a, it was a great place to be able to be for a guy who was a political activist. You could go down there and be with my friends and not have to worry about things. When we had groups play in our house, I still remember the first time Graf Young came to my house. We had something to eat there, and he came in the house, and he looked around, and, uh, he said, uh, to my son, Michael, who was about five at the time of this, "Has he ever seen one of my type?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Where may I sit?" I said, "Wherever the hell you want." Then he could sit down and be himself. We had to go through these kind of "step and fetchit" things in case someone would say, "You sit over there," or something like that. Uh, and, of course, uh, he was always welcome in the house. He came in the house and ate and drank, but I felt bad that people had to go through that. When we came to their turf, they accepted you. But when they came to your turf for the first time, they had to make sure that it was not a one way street. And, uh, I think the experiences that were provided by the Club caused a lot of people who might have wanted to make a one way street change their mind and change their act and change their public and personal demeanor because of that. So, I think places like that around the country did a lot to get some people who really weren't racist to really realize that they could never be racists. You didn't care whether the guy playing the horn was black, brown, yellow, or purple. You knew if he could play. The fact is that most of the cats were black could play better than the rest of us. That's just the way it was. Whether they had natural rhythm or that it was just the fact that they were better. And it was a strange thing for some African-Americans to realize that they really were better than someone else. Out of the experiences and the inner changes that took place on the second floor of that Club, when people became friends there, you know, we realized the importance of the book that Sammy Davis wrote years ago called <u>Yes I Can</u>. And a lot of those folks, as old as they were, realized, "Yes, they could!" But they couldn't have done that going through the white local 43, and it really never happened in 92 after the

merger. When I moved down to Georgia, I joined the Georgia's local. There were no black musicians belonging to the Athens, Georgia local, but there were a lot of black guys playing in clubs in that city. Of course, they were all hired the same way, they were hired on non-union bases because black club owners...Because here were no more separate black local.

Q: So they didn't belong to the local because they wouldn't have gotten any jobs.

T: Precisely, precisely.

Q: The old white boy network.

T: Sure. See, there's always a reason to be a renegade. There are some people that are just bastards. Like Quantrell's Raiders after the Civil War. So, that was a great thing about The Club here. People didn't have to be renegades. They could be, they could have a place of their own. They were the "Raisins In the Sun."

Q: Anything else?

T: No, that's about it.

Q: Lovely story.

T: Well, interesting times. It's, uh...Just fascinates me that Lloyd Plummer's alive. When you see him tomorrow, will you tell him I have to get over to see him. I didn't know where he was or what...